

PUNISHER

MARVEL 5

AARON
SAIZ
AZACETA
STEWART

“

Maria, no matter what happens, promise me you'll keep moving until you're out of sight of this place. And you won't look back.

”



PARENTAL
ADVISORY

AFTER RETIRED MARINE FRANK CASTLE'S WIFE AND CHILDREN WERE KILLED BY STRAY GUNFIRE DURING A SHOOT-OUT IN CENTRAL PARK, HE BEGAN A ONE-MAN VIGILANTE WAR ON CRIME. ARMED WITH A VAST ARSENAL AND GRIM DETERMINATION, HE BECAME THE...

PUNISHER

THE CULT OF ASSASSINS KNOWN AS THE HAND MADE FRANK CASTLE AN OFFER HE COULDN'T REFUSE: BECOME THEIR HIGH SLAYER IN EXCHANGE FOR THE RESURRECTION OF HIS LONG-DEAD WIFE, MARIA. FRANK IS JUST ONE IN A LONG LINE OF FABLED FISTS OF THE BEAST, THE HAND HAVING OBSERVED HIM SINCE HIS CHILDHOOD. FRANK NOW RESIDES IN THE HAND'S FORTRESS IN JAPAN ALONG WITH AN UNSTABLE MARIA, WHOSE MEMORY OF HER TRAGIC PAST REMAINS SHROUDED. FRANK HAS ALSO BEEN MANIFESTING SUPERNATURAL POWERS DUE TO HIS GROWING CONNECTION TO THE DEMONIC BEAST.

FRANK HAS BEEN USING HIS NEW RESOURCES TO COMBAT THE WORLD'S EVILDOERS, INCLUDING A CULT OF WARMONGERS LED BY THE GOD ARES, WHO IS ANGERED BY THE HAND'S INFLUENCE OVER FRANK. WHEN A GROUP OF NINJA ESCAPED DEATH AT THE HANDS OF ARES, THE HAND'S PRIESTESS SLAUGHTERED THEIR FAMILIES IN FRONT OF THEM FOR THEIR PERCEIVED WEAKNESS. HORRIFIED BY THIS TURN OF EVENTS, FRANK IS NOW SEEKING TO ESCAPE THE HAND ALONGSIDE MARIA.

THE KING OF KILLERS

Book ONE, Chapter FIVE

"GOD BLESS THE BEAST"

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"FRANK...
WHAT'S
HAPPENED?"



NO TIME TO TALK,
MARIA. NO TIME
TO PACK. WE'RE
LEAVING.

BUT YOU'RE
HURT, YOU'RE
BLEEDING.

NO.



IT'S
NOT MY
BLOOD.

MARIA, NO
MATTER WHAT
HAPPENS, PROMISE
ME YOU'LL KEEP
MOVING UNTIL YOU'RE
OUT OF SIGHT OF
THIS PLACE.



AND
YOU WON'T
LOOK BACK.

TO ANY MAN OF
FAITH, DOUBTS WILL
SOMEDAY COME...

...MOUTH-FIRST...

...LIKE STARVING
MAGGOTS DRAWN TO
A FESTERING WOUND.



MOMENTS EARLIER...

WHAT
DID YOU
DO?

I MURDERED
THEIR FAMILIES
WHILE THEY
WATCHED.

IF LEFT UNGUTTED, THOSE MAGGOTS
WILL EAT EVEN THE MOST FRIGHT-FILLED
OF GOD-FEARING MEN TO THE BONE.



LIKE THE RIGHT HANDS OF
COWARDS AND THE
TONGUES OF PEACEMAKERS,
DOUBTS MUST BE LOPPED
OFF AND BURNED TO ASH.

NOW THEY
HAVE BECOME TRUE
CHILDREN OF THE BEAST.
AND THEY ARE YOURS
TO COMMAND.

AS
ARE WE
ALL.

TELL US,
OH MIGHTY
FIST...

...WHAT
WOULD YOU
HAVE US DO
NEXT?



DOUBTS MUST
BE FED STEEL.



AMONG THE SICKLY
ONES, IT HAS ALWAYS
BEEN SAID AND
ALWAYS BEEN TRUE...



...THAT FAITH NOT
ROOTED IN FEAR IS
NOT ROOTED AT ALL.

FEAR OF
DAMNATION AND
ETERNAL MISERY.



HRRRWWW!



OF AN AGONIZING
DEATH WITHOUT
MEANING.

WITHOUT ANYTHING
THAT COMES AFTER.



FEAR OF HOW LITTLE WE
TRULY KNOW ABOUT WHAT
LIVES WITHIN THE ETHER.

OR IN THE DEEPEST
RECESSES OF OUR
OWN BROKEN SELVES.





HOPE IS A
LEPROSY.

SALVATION
IS A LIE.



ONLY WITH FEAR IN YOUR
HEART CAN YOU HOLD
FAST WHEN COME ROILING
THE SEAS OF DOUBT.



TRUST IN FEAR
AND MURDER.

GOD
BLESS THE
BEAST.

FOR THESE SHALL
ABIDE FOREVER WITHIN
THE WORLD OF MAN.

GOD
BLESS THE
BEAST.

GOD
BLESS THE
BEAST.



MURDER SHALL
MAKE YOU FREE.

NOW.

FRANK...

JUST
KEEP MOVING,
MARIA.

BUT...THE
CHILDREN...

WE'LL
TALK ABOUT IT
LATER.

ONCE
WE'RE AWAY
FROM THIS
PLACE.

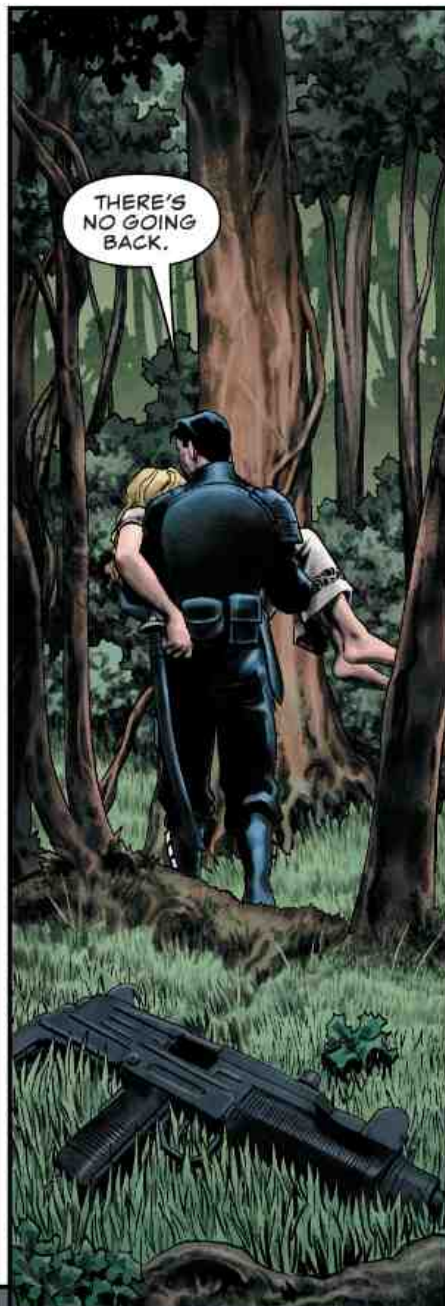
OKAY, MY
LOVE, I'D LIKE
THAT. I'D LIKE
TO BE AWAY
FROM...

...FROM...
FROM THIS...

FRANK...

...I DON'T
FEEL SO
WELL.







SLAY YOUR DOUBTS WITH
THE SAME FERVOR
WITH WHICH YOU SLAY
YOUR FELLOW MAN...

...AND A PLACE SHALL
BE PREPARED FOR YOU IN
THE GREAT RED KINGDOM
OF THE BEAST.



BUT ALLOW DOUBTS TO FEED
AND GROW FAT...ALLOW YOUR
FEAR TO BECOME MISGUIDED...

...AND ONE DAY, THE
BEAST MAY SEE FIT TO
REMIND YOU, IN HIS WAY,
THAT HE IS THE BEAST...

FRANK?



...AND YOU
ARE MEAT.

THESE HAVE BEEN
THE PROVERBS OF
THE SICKLY ONES.

GOD BLESS
THE BEAST.



STEADMAN STERNBERGER WAS A STUDIOUS AND SWEET-NATURED CHILD WHO HAD NEVER THROWN A PUNCH AND HAD NO INTENTION OF LEARNING HOW.



EVEN AS HE BECAME AN IRRESISTIBLE TARGET FOR EVERY BULLY ACROSS THE FIVE BOROUGH.

MEANWHILE, TEENAGE FRANK CASTLE WAS A TIGER TRAPPED INSIDE A PETTING ZOO.



EAGER FOR ANY EXCUSE TO INFLICT RIGHTEOUS VIOLENCE.



TOUCH HIM AGAIN AND I TEAR OUT YOUR FINGERNAILS.



YOU'RE &%%\$#@ CRAZY, CASTLE!

THEY WERE THE PERFECT MATCH.





YOU NEVER GO TO CLASS. THE WHOLE SCHOOL'S TERRIFIED OF YOU, EVEN THE TEACHERS.

YOU'RE PROBABLY ABOUT TO GET EXPELLED, FOR GOOD THIS TIME. AND NOW YOU'VE TAKEN UP DRINKING AT SCHOOL?

DRINKING LIKE A FISH. LIKE...



"...LIKE THERE'S SOME KINDA FIRE INSIDE YOU THAT YOU'RE TRYING TO PUT OUT."



FRANK, THERE'VE BEEN SO MANY MORNINGS I STOOD ON THE CORNER WISHING A DUMPTRUCK WOULD COME BARRELING BY SO I COULD STEP OUT IN FRONT OF IT.

BETTER THAN HAVING TO GET ON THE BUS THAT WOULD BRING ME HERE.

BUT NOT ANYMORE. YOU LITERALLY SAVED MY LIFE, FRANK CASTLE.

NOW MAYBE I CAN DO THE SAME FOR YOU.

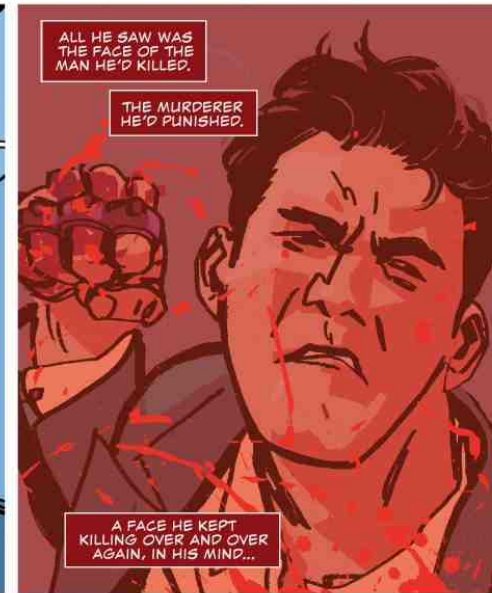


THE WAY I SEE IT, ALL YOU NEED IS THE RIGHT OPPORTUNITY TO CHANNEL ALL THAT RAGE AND AGGRESSION YOU'VE GOT INTO A PLACE WHERE IT'LL BE ACCEPTED. REWARDED, EVEN.

FRANK, HEAR ME OUT... BUT HOW WOULD YOU FEEL ABOUT BECOMING A DEVIL?



THAT'S THE WAY, CASTLE! GET THAT LUMBER IN THEIR TEETH! LET 'EM KNOW YOU'RE OUT THERE!





MARIA ELIZABETH FALCONIO WAS A DUTIFUL STUDENT AT ST. THERESE'S ACADEMY OF THE SACRED HEART WHO'D NEVER BEEN IN TROUBLE A DAY OF HER LIFE.

WHO PRAYED EVERY NIGHT BEFORE BED.



WHO WAS THAT?

THERE WAS SOMETHING ABOUT HER. SOMETHING FRANK WOULD NEVER ADMIT. NOT EVEN TO HIMSELF.



SHE REMINDED HIM OF SOMEONE.



THE WOMAN HE'D WATCHED DIE IN THE STREET.

WHOSE GHOST HAD NEVER STOPPED HAUNTING HIM.



FRANK?
WHERE YOU GOING?

AND SOMETHING ABOUT THE BLOODY BRUTE SHE'D GLIMPSED ON THE ICE MUST'VE HAUNTED MARIA TOO.

THE WAY A MOTH DREAMS OF THE FLAME.



BECAUSE THE NEXT
TIME FRANK PLAYED,
SHE WAS THERE. AND
THE TIME AFTER THAT.

STEADMAN
ENCOURAGED
HIS FRIEND TO
GO AND TALK
TO HER.



IT WAS THE ONLY
TIME HE EVER SAW
FEAR IN FRANK'S EYES.

SO STEADMAN DID WHAT HE THOUGHT
HE SHOULD, TO HELP THE FRIEND WHO
HAD SAVED HIS LIFE, AND WHO NEEDED
SAVING HIMSELF.



HE LIED.

HE LIKES
YOU, YOU
KNOW.



FRANK.

HE TELLS
ME ALL THE TIME.
HE SEES YOU COMING
TO HIS GAMES. HE'S
JUST...SHY.

HERE, HE
WANTED ME
TO GIVE YOU
THIS NOTE.



HE WROTE
ALL THESE
THINGS?

ABOUT
ME?

THEY WERE
SUCH SWEET
THINGS.

SO SOFT AND
FLOWERY.

SUCH SWEET
LITTLE LIES.







WHAT HAPPENED WHEN HE ALLOWED HIMSELF TO BECOME DISTRACTED.



THE CAR WAS STOLEN.
FOUND WRECKED IN
THE WOODS OF JERSEY.
WITH JUST ONE
PERSON STILL INSIDE.



HE HADN'T BEEN DRIVING,
HADN'T BEEN DRINKING,
DESPITE THE BEER CANS
LITTERING THE SCENE.

WHOEVER ELSE HAD
BEEN IN THE CAR HAD
LEFT HIM THERE
AFTER THE WRECK.



LEFT HIM HANGING
THERE TO BLEED OUT.

THE AUTOPSY WOULD
ESTIMATE THAT
IT'D TAKEN AT
LEAST FOUR HOURS.



FOR THE FIRST FEW HOURS,
STEADMAN STERNBERGER HAD
SCREAMED UNTIL HIS THROAT
WAS RAW AND USELESS.

BUT
NO ONE
HEARD.

SO IN THE
END, HE WENT
QUIETLY.



HE DIED
MEEK...

...LIKE A
LAMB AT THE
ALTAR.

A FEW DAYS LATER.



HELLO?

IT'S
ME.

OH, FRANK,
I'VE BEEN
WORRIED SICK.
WHERE HAVE
YOU BEEN?



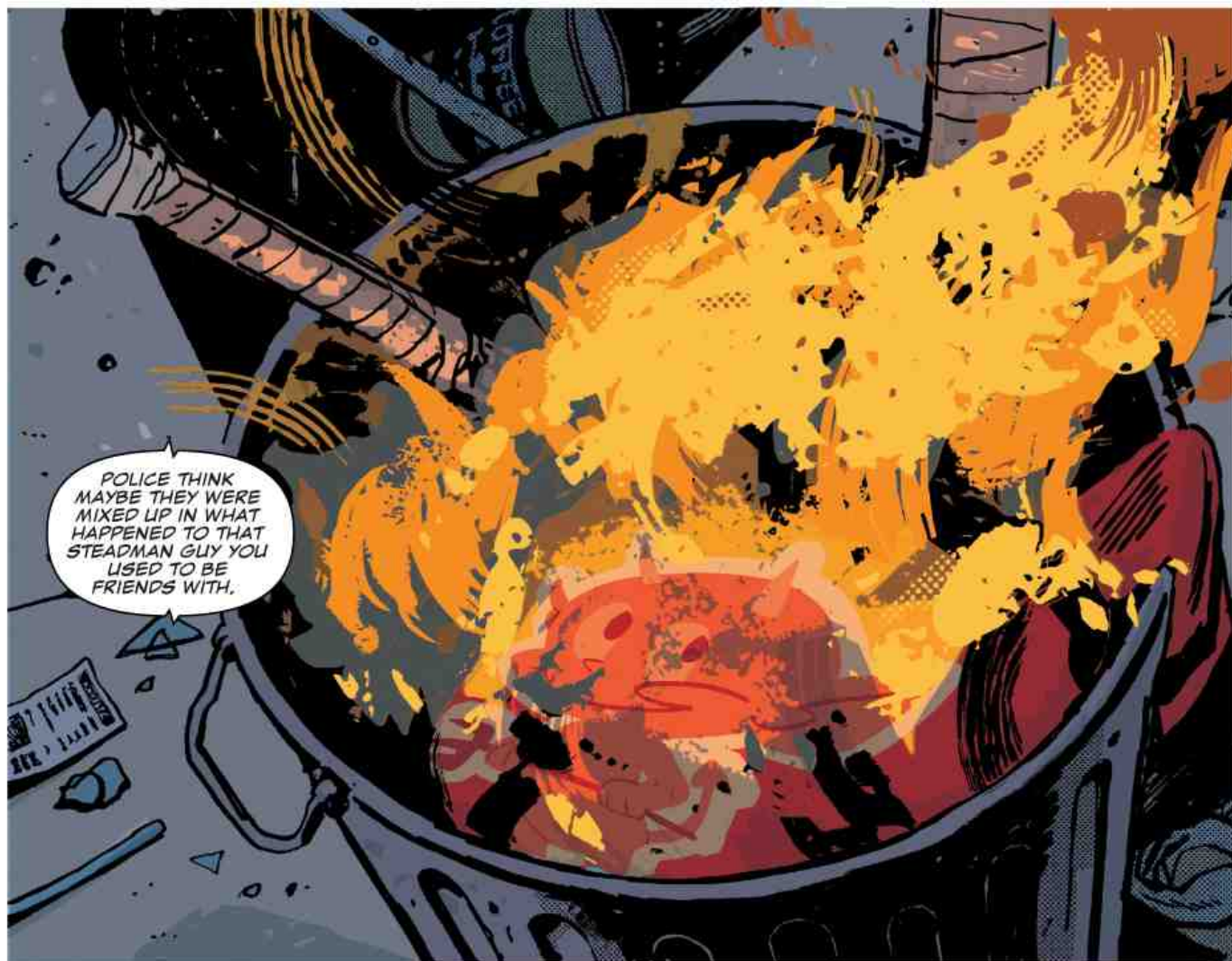
HAD TO
TAKE CARE
OF A COUPLE
THINGS.

HAVE YOU
EVEN HEARD?
IT'S ALL OVER
THE NEWS.



SOME KIDS
FROM YOUR SCHOOL
WHO'D GONE MISSING...
THEY FOUND THEM
TONIGHT.

FRANK,
THEY FOUND
THEM BEATEN
TO DEATH.







YOUR BELOVED WIFE'S TRANSITION FROM DEATH TO LIFE REMAINS INCOMPLETE.

SHE CONTINUES TO NEED THE SACRED TREATMENTS THAT ONLY THE HAND CAN PROVIDE.

I'M AFRAID IF SHE EVER STRAYS FROM THIS CITADEL AGAIN, FROM THE ROOT OF THE DARK POWER THAT RESURRECTED HER...

...THEN
MARIA CASTLE
WILL DIE.

FOR THE FINAL
TIME.

A MOST
FRIGHTFULLY
PAINFUL
DEATH.

BUT
AREN'T THEY
ALL?

WELCOME
HOME, LORD
PUNISHER.





IS THERE ANYTHING
ELSE YOU'D LIKE TO
DISCUSS, MY
LORD?



WHATEVER
THE HELL YOU
ARE...WHEN THIS
IS DONE...

...I
WILL KILL
YOU SO THAT
YOU STAY
DEAD.



"WHEN THIS IS DONE." OH, HOW I'VE MISSED YOU, MY LORD.

IF IT MATTERS, KNOW THAT THOSE I SLAUGHTERED WERE FAMILIES WHO'D BEEN DEVOTED TO THE HAND FOR GENERATIONS. THEY WERE ALL SERVANTS OF THE BEAST. ALL BLESSED MURDERERS IN THEIR OWN RIGHT.



AND YOU ARE CORRECT. SOMEDAY, WE WILL ALL BE REWARDED FOR THE KILLING WE'VE DONE, AND HAVE YET TO DO.

SPEAKING OF WHICH, YOUR TROOPS REMAIN READY. OR WOULD YOU PREFER TO REST AFTER YOUR TIRING SOJOURN THROUGH THE FOREST?



I'M GOING ALONE.



IS THAT WISE, MY LORD? AGAINST THE GOD OF WAR HIMSELF?

PERHAPS YOU SHOULD AT LEAST WAIT UNTIL YOU'VE FULLY MANIFESTED ALL OF THE FIVE GIFTS OF THE--

IF MARIA'S DEAD WHEN I GET BACK...



...I'M BURNING THIS PLACE TO THE GROUND.



THERE WAS A MOMENT I WITNESSED THAT I THINK ABOUT OFTEN.

THE MOMENT WHEN THEY FIRST SAW EACH OTHER. AFTER THE GLORIOUS BATTLE IN THE PUNISHER'S BASEMENT HIDEOUT.



EVEN THROUGH THE HAZE OF REANIMATION, MARIA RECOGNIZED HER HUSBAND AND SAID SOMETHING, SOME HALF-REMEMBERED LINE FROM YEARS BEFORE.

THEY WERE WORDS THAT HIT HIM LIKE A JOLT.



AND HE ACCEPTED THAT IT WAS TRULY HER. NOT JUST SOME REANIMATED HUSK. IN THAT MOMENT, FRANK CASTLE REALIZED...

...THAT HE WOULD HAVE TO END HIS WAR.



SUCH SWEET THINGS. HE NEVER SAID THEM ALOUD, BUT THE NOTES...THE NOTES HIS FRIEND WOULD BRING...

AND THE HAND WOULD GIVE HIM THE BEST CHANCE TO DO SO.



IN THAT SAME MOMENT, I REALIZED THAT THE PUNISHER KNEW HOW TO LIE, EVEN TO HIMSELF.

...DO YOU THINK FRANK REALLY WROTE THEM?



AND THUS I KNEW HE WOULD MAKE A MOST EXCELLENT FIST OF THE BEAST.

AND SO HE SHALL.

I THINK YOU SHOULD TELL ME ALL ABOUT IT, MY DEAR.

IF HIS LIES
DON'T GET
HIM KILLED.

"HE'S HERE, MY LORD!
WE'VE DOWNED HIS
CHOPPER! BUT HE'S
STILL ALIVE!"





...THE
PUNISHER SHALL BE
REDEEMED!!!



NEXT:

PUNISHER



FRANK CASTLE WANTS TO END HIS WAR ONCE AND FOR ALL. BUT STANDING IN HIS WAY IS ARES, THE GOD OF WAR, WHO SEES THE PUNISHER AS HIS GREATEST DISCIPLE--A LOST DISCIPLE WHO MUST BE REMINDED OF THE WAYS OF WAR.

IF YOU ARE STRUGGLING WITH THOUGHTS OF SUICIDE, OR ARE WORRIED ABOUT A FRIEND OR LOVED ONE, PLEASE REACH OUT TO A COUNSELOR OR SOMEONE YOU TRUST; CALL YOUR LOCAL HELP LINE; OR CALL THE NATIONAL SUICIDE PREVENTION LIFELINE: 1-800-273-8255.

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